



Five Essential Characteristics of Successful Diversity Plans

According to Williams and Cowley (2007), there have been numerous diversity plans with different foci, and each of those plans brings with it an important dimension of diversity that needs to be considered when formulating a strategic plan. There is definitely no dearth of ideas in terms of diversity planning. The true challenge lies in envisioning a strategic implementation process that would result in solid results across institutions. Williams and Cowley (2007), in discussing the Inclusive Excellence Model, suggest various ‘levers’ that need to be in place for a successful implementation of a diversity initiative and one important lever is to have a strategic plan for the initiative.

This strategy according to the authors begins by including diversity in the mission statement of the institution. Although this move does not do anything by itself, it does have a powerful symbolic message that can act as a boost to diversity initiatives across campus. Secondly, they suggest having campus wide diversity plans, authorized at the highest level of the institution.

However to be effective these plans need to be implemented through a decentralized approach, through various departments and units, with each of these bodies taking stock of themselves, finding key areas that need effort and working towards the improvement of those areas. While I agree that a strategic plan and mentioning diversity in the mission statement are important, I also know that most successful diversity plans have these five essential characteristics:

1. Visible and strong support from the top

Committed Presidents provide annual diversity reports to their college and city. Many use their annual community — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr celebration—to provide a status report on their diversity initiatives. For example former President E. Gordon Gee of The Ohio State University stated in his annual report that OSU was “well positioned to move from “excellence to eminence. If it plans to do so within the context and demands of a multicultural society, it will have to move from the mere programming of diversity and the casual rhetoric of diversity to embracing diversity as a core value — deeply rooted in the University’s culture, community, and character.” (Source: <http://www.osu.edu/diversityplan/index.php>)

Strong and visible diversity leadership can help create a culture of inclusion and diversity at every level of the organization — from the Trustees on down. In fact the depth of cultural change necessary to fundamentally change the campus requires strong leadership. Senior leadership support is essential to establishing and institutionalizing a campus-wide initiative. They set the tone for detailing the change in vision, building



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institutional capacity and soliciting the necessary resources to improve campus diversity.

They must be committed to establishing diversity as an institutional priority with a sense of urgency. While these senior administrators may ask a task force or a committee to create the driving vision, they should remain active and involved so that the vision is backed by a group of people who can hold the campus community accountable for its adoption, provide incentives for success, generate short-term wins, consolidate gains, and anchor new approaches in the culture (Williams, Berger & McClendon, 2005).

The potential of institutional change is unleashed when administrators share goals for the future. Senior leadership helps to launch this process by creating a broad institutional vision, redirecting resources necessary to implement that vision, and requiring plan development and accountability from individuals at multiple levels of the institution. Only the president, provost, and other senior leaders can focus attention and prioritize diversity in a manner sufficient for institutional changes to be deep and transformative (Williams & Clowney, 2007).

2. Adequate resources to reach its goals

Resources help demonstrate there is a “real” commitment to diversity. Any resistance to this commitment can prevent the vision of change from truly being carried out. Many theorists argue that conflict over limited resources is an inevitable consequence of organizational life and this may be especially true on college and university campuses because of their dependence upon various external sources for the resources necessary to survive (Williams, Berger & McClendon, 2005).

Academic institutions consist of distinct departments, schools and administrative units that can often have extremely specific and conflicting interests. This leads to decisions being made based on which interest is successfully pushed to the forefront of the administrative process and can often be detrimental to the losing department. Limited resources can make the final decision-making process a zero-sum game for those involved. To avoid the conflict that will surely result from this, adequate resources are crucial.

Colleges and universities are not just dependent on material resources; they also must focus on acquiring and generating symbolic resources like reputation and prestige or profiles of incoming students. This focus on symbolic resources helps explain why



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traditional notions of excellence (student test scores) continues to drive organizational behavior in higher education, even as relatively recent demographic and economic imperatives in the external environment create a strong impetus to be more expansive (Williams, Berger & McClendon, 2005). To change this, institutions must understand the need to be more expansive in defining student excellence and campus prestige.

Academic institutions must understand the importance of the vested interests of each department to successfully promote diversity. True institutional change will not occur unless the necessary financial, symbolic and human resources are put forth toward changing the culture. New initiatives will fall short unless there is a reallocation of the present institutional resources or additional resources become available. Tough decisions can result if an institution decides to fully commit to a more diverse campus, but the long-term benefits of diversity are too important to not prioritize it.



Diversity Tip-No matter how sweet sounding the rhetoric is, if a campus does not commit funding to diversity efforts, real change won't happen.

3. Accountability Built-in

Accountability is the process for determining and monitoring responsibility for meeting campus diversity goals and needs. Recognition for diversity progress refers to recognizing and rewarding individuals and organizations when progress has been made towards meeting campus diversity goals and needs. The ultimate goal should be to institutionalize diversity. You can start the process by determining and monitoring who is responsible for meeting diversity goals and needs.

Every diversity plan should have a section that lists who is accountable for it and the timeline in which that activity is to be completed. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the president to hold vice presidents and deans responsible for making progress toward the achievement of the university's diversity goals. Using all available management tools, the president should hold them accountable for creating and maintaining a climate inclusive of diversity within their colleges/offices. This can be done in part by establishing incentives and rewards for individuals who make progress toward achieving these goals. Success, as evidenced by annual reports, should also be a factor considered in annual evaluations of key administrators.

(Source: <http://www.osu.edu/diversityplan/index.php>)



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In the University of Oregon's Diversity Plan (2007), the Vice President required Student Affairs directors to document activities and programs that have supported the University's diversity plan. A requirement such as this not only encourages a sense of accountability but it also allows educational institutions an outlet for improvement. Documentation of activities and programs that support diversity allow a space for reflection on and recognition of what worked and what did not (University of Oregon, 2007). This kind of documentation also helps institutions pinpoint who is and is not meeting the specifications of the diversity plan, which in turn makes everyone more accountable.

4. Campus wide involvement

Achieving diversity requires the active engagement and participation by all members of the university community. The commitment to diversity should be evident in all of your college's communications, including admissions literature, website, and course catalogues. It is important that leadership be fully committed to the goals and that this commitment be demonstrated in talk and in action. This commitment also includes modeling diversity in the governing board and in senior administrative positions, the celebration of diversity in all aspects of the internal and external community, and the willingness to allocate resources to achieve equity and diversity and to make support of the diversity strategic plan part of annual performance appraisals (North Carolina State University, 2007).

I think you will agree that is a powerful vision statement for diversity. I liked it immediately when I first read it. It's holistic, inclusive and is the type of vision that should be replicated across this country. Whether they achieve the lofty goals included in the statement is up for debate, but at least they have a road map and understand that it takes a campus wide effort to produce the type of cultural shift needed to achieve real change.

An impressive body of work in the past few years documents the educational benefits of diversity not just for students of color but for the student body in general. Milem et al. (2005) have summarized some of these benefits from recent literature. They find that diverse campus communities provide a more rich cultural and learning experience for students that allow them to be better prepared members of a democratic society. A diverse environment allows students to be exposed to other ideas than those held by their own racial or ethnic group.

Furthermore, students in diverse communities also learn to think critically, and exhibit less

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racial bias towards members of another ethnic or racial group. Promoting values of justice, equality and fairness are as much an education, as more traditional learning practices are. However, Milem et al. (2005) also posit, that in order to achieve the benefits associated with diversity, there needs to be an institutional commitment towards promoting diversity. A greater institutional commitment to diversity is considered to be congruent with fewer racial tensions on campus, whereas a campus that has a marginal focus on diversity might be perceived as potentially hostile by ethnic minorities.

Another way of putting the same idea according to Milem et al. (2005), is that diversity may not be beneficial just by itself, unless there is a systematic institutional effort to promote diversity on campus. Such an effort needs to be visible to encourage students to engage in inter-racial dialogue and friendships even on an informal and personal level. Where such an effort is invisible, or not systematic, students do not reap the benefits of diversity and are discouraged from interacting with people of other racial and ethnic groups.



Diversity Tip-Use all available mediums to introduce the campus diversity plan and inform the entire campus of the coming change so that staff and faculty not only feel a part of it, but eventually take ownership of it.

5. Timelines

A common complaint of diversity action plans is that they take far too much time and the benefits are not always immediately clear. An easy way to mitigate this criticism is by establishing a timeline for your campus with many checkpoints to track your progress. The goals on the timeline should not be open-ended or fuzzy; they need to be clear and achievable. Deadlines must be established to meet the goals and benchmarks and to serve as checkpoints in the initiative.

Williams and Clowney (2007) see this as a common problem for colleges and universities seeking to implement a diversity action plan. After a plan is created, a large majority of diversity reports do a good job of documenting the current problems and presenting solid if not transformative recommendations for change, but they rarely mention current diversity capabilities and resources, implementation processes, authority for overseeing day to-day implementation activities, and budget allocations to finance the many aspects of the plan. Consequently, many diversity plans are quickly shelved, because institutions fail to adequately explicate how change will happen over time.



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When deciding to prioritize diversity, administrative leaders must create a more permanent and transparent context for investing time and resources in diversity efforts. Timelines filled with clear goals are the best way to do this. They require colleges and universities to embrace comprehensive performance measurement indicators linked to goals, objectives, strategies and evidence. Timelines are powerful tools for helping institutions align their change vision with bureaucratic structures, day-to-day operations, and overarching organizational processes (Williams & Clowney, 2007).

They also can be used to communicate progress to members of the community. When constructed as the guiding vision of a diversity plan, such a tool can enable campuses to move from simply “checking off” diversity outcomes, to managing a comprehensive plan to reach diversity and educational quality goals and to place these goals at the core of institutional planning and action.



Diversity Tip-State your diversity goals in behavioral terms-or measurable terms. For example, by the fall semester the President’s Leadership Team will have created a student & faculty diversity recruitment plan. That is a measurable goal.

All references and Diversity Tips cited in this article can be found in the booklet: How to Create a Diversity Plan for your Institution by Dr. Charles A. Taylor. [You can get your copy here.](#)

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